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REVIEW & OUTLOOK

Intelligence Failure

Tomorrow the House will vote on President Reagan's request for military aid to the contras in Nicaragua. It will be a somber day whichever way the vote goes. The past few weeks' debate about Central America has unearthed a vast amount of ignorance and arrogance about how the world works and what Americans must do to defend themselves and their values.

A couple of weeks ago CIA Director William Casey said that Nicaragua's Sandinista government was waging a disinformation campaign aimed at the congressmen who would soon vote on contra aid. The White House said it would release a declassified version of the details.

From the Hill came the roar of congressmen outraged at the suggestion that they could be duped by a foreign government. Then the Washington Post sprang forward with a scoop: Mr. Casey's "disinformation campaign" was actually just some consultants to the Sandinistas proposing a publicity blitz with "language and tactics similar to those of many other legislative lobbying campaigns."

You get the clever message? The Sandinista campaign is a legitimate lobbying effort. It is the administration's attempt to discredit it that constitutes the deception. The White House decided not to release its information after all.

After a while, you grow numb. Last night, public television's documentary program "Frontline" scheduled a pre-vote film about the contras titled "Who's Running This War?" The production had so much political spin on it that it almost achieved orbit. In the film, contra leaders were Somocistas. The troops were bloodthirsty and ineffectual. Their U.S. supporters were bizarre right-wingers.

We have gotten used to this stuff, but recently there has been a fresh shock. As Michael Ledeen details nearby, Alvaro Baldizon is a former Sandinista official who defected and came to this country eight months

ago. Before his defection he served as chief investigator to the minister of the interior, Tomas Borge. Mr. Baldizon says he investigated, among other things, international charges of human-rights abuse by the Sandinistas, to help the government answer them. He saw some of the innermost workings of the regime.

In the U.S., Mr. Baldizon has been telling his story. Each new question asked of him elicits more tales of murder, terror and deception. A couple of weeks ago Mr. Baldizon, answering one question, mentioned that he had direct knowledge of Sandinista soldiers disguising themselves as contras and committing atrocities in the contras' name. They were specially trained in East Germany. One group of them, said Mr. Baldizon, posed as counterrevolutionary peasants, killing Sandinista collaborators to prove their authenticity. They would join genuine contra bands, and in camp at night they would slit the throats of their new comrades-in-arms. The literature on communist military campaigns since World War II alludes to similar deceptions, but seldom has anyone come forth claiming firsthand knowledge of such events in progress. Yet Mr. Baldizon's revelations have hardly caused a ripple in the public debate.

Mr. Baldizon's charges could of course be spurious, even though some of his other claims, as Mr. Ledeen reports, have been checked against the findings of human-rights groups. He has named names, dates and places.

If his charges are true, the current debate about Nicaragua has been just a schoolchild's exercise, because the "facts" that people think they know have been manipulated with a deliberateness that we literally cannot imagine. No one has to believe Mr. Baldizon, but it is a remarkable phenomenon when, in the midst of a roaring debate, his charges are treated as if they were never made. This failing is part of a bigger one. Americans are truly innocent. There are some kinds

of evil that we simply cannot believe, especially when disbelief is convenient for us.

We are used to open political debate. We hate clandestine manipulation because it robs us of the reliable information that makes open debate possible. When we are told that such manipulation exists, we desperately try to avoid knowing it, so that we will not have to face its complications.

It took a long time to convince people of the reality of the Holocaust. It took a long time for people to believe the horror of the Khmer Rouge. So far the U.S. has been lucky, and has made up for such failures of intelligence. But no one is lucky forever, and persisting in this self-satisfied ignorance could sooner or later be fatal.